

IN NEWS WE TRUST:
BELIEVABILITY OF NEWS CONTENT IN
AMERICAN AND RUSSIAN SOURCES
FROM THE EXAMPLE OF THE HACKING ISSUE

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Introduction

Nowadays, it is hard to imagine our lives without constantly being exposed to news about wars, international conflicts, and natural disasters. People learn from news media about what is going on in the world. And the news media determine stories that their audiences will talk about for the next few days. However, news outlets present slightly different representations of the world by concentrating on different details and facts. By doing so, each news organization, in a way, creates a new reality where the events presented are only a reflection of what really happened, which could affect people's opinions on public affairs depending on the outlet(s) from where they get their news (McCombs, 2014).

Even though politics may be perceived as a field where people may manipulate information, it is not normatively true. Obtaining information about current events is important for making appropriate political decisions. Hochschild and Einstein (2015) noticed that the use of incorrect information and the failure to use correct information “stand in opposition to the view of almost every serious thinker who has considered how to make democratic governance stable and effective” (p. 586). Moreover, moving from the active use of misinformation to the new understanding of facts “not only requires a great effort but also increases dissonance and discomfort” (p. 624).

Kuklinski, Quirk, Jerit, Schwieder, and Rich (2000) pointed out that the difference between being “uninformed” and being “misinformed” is in the fact that the former is about not having a belief about the correct answer to a factual question and the latter is about holding a false or unsupported belief about a fact. The (2000) study highlighted that “not only does this misinformation function as a barrier to factually educating citizens, it can lead to collective preferences that differ significantly from those that would exist if people were adequately

informed” (Kuklinski et al., 2000, p. 792). Later, Lewandowsky, Ecker, Seifert, Schwarz, and Cook (2012) supported earlier findings, saying that “if individuals are misinformed, they may likewise make decisions for themselves and their families that are not in their best interest and can have serious consequences” (p. 107).

The 2016 presidential elections have brought attention to the “fake news” phenomenon. After being mentioned numerous times by Donald Trump, this term has become commonly used in the political background to explain away any type of negative and inconvenient information (Blom, forthcoming). News media raised a question about the consequences of “fake news” and misinformation for democracy. It was noticed by Botei (2017) that “fake news” could influence American citizens’ opinions during the elections and, thus, influenced the election’s outcome.

According to the Pew Research Center, most Americans suspect that “fake news” is having an impact. About 64% of U.S. adults say fabricated news stories result in a great deal of confusion about the current issues and events (Mitchell, Barthel, & Holcomb, 2016). Additionally, according to this research, this sense of confusion is shared widely across incomes, education levels, partisan affiliations, and most other demographic characteristics.

Even though “fake news” is a relatively new term, the misinformation and manipulation of public opinion has existed for a long time caused by the development of communication channels for propaganda purposes and their impact on society. Jowett and O’Donnell (2006) explained propaganda as “the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist” (p. 7). They continued that the motives of propaganda were not necessarily negative, and judgment depended on the ideology it supported. They used the example of Voice of America (VOA) behind the Iron Curtain during the Cold War. Voice of America (VOA) is a

U.S. government-funded international multimedia agency; however, in the former Soviet Union, it was known as a radio broadcast. Established in 1942, it transmitted in Russian language from their headquarters in Washington, DC. At that time, it was a source of world news and popular western music.

More specifically, the people who listened to the VOA found satisfaction for their hunger for information, and thus the VOA had altruistic motives. However, the information they received from the VOA was “ideologically injected to shape positive perceptions about the United States and its allies and to manipulate attitudes toward democracy, capitalism, and freedom” (Jowett & O’Donnell, 2006, p. 14). Most American citizens would not find these ideas as negative, but the communist government in the USSR did (Jowett & O’Donnell, 2006).

The reason why people are easily manipulated by misinformation is in the way humans perceive information. According to Southwell and Thorson (2015), when people evaluate new information, they only concentrate on a few characteristics. They consider the consistency of new information with their “existing set of beliefs, assessing whether an idea fits previously held notions” (Southwell & Thorson, 2015, p. 590). Thus, skepticism toward new information is not “the norm” for news consumers, and they can easily believe in news that coincides with our pre-existing attitudes, even when the information is false or misleading.

This thesis analyzed how U.S. citizens perceive information about an international conflict involving the Russia. It focused on the hacking issue during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign.

Situational background

On November 8, 2016, Donald Trump was elected as the 45th President of the United States. During his presidential election campaign, the world news media started to talk about his

connections to Russia. Reviewing the situation, Yorish, Buchanan, and Watkins (2018) noticed that it was easy to lose the narrative in the Trump-Russia story given the relentless pace and complexity of the news. Stepping back to view the timeline from the beginning reveals parallel threads—contacts, hacking, and social media fraud—often crossed during the elections.

For several months, almost every news media outlet in the U.S. highlighted the role Russia had in the hacker attacks on the servers of the U.S. Democratic Party. After the elections, Robert Mueller was appointed by the Justice Department to lead a special investigation to find whether Russia was involved in the cyber threats to support Trump and whether the president's associates colluded with Russians (Tsynareva, 2017).

Russia dominated the national political conversation after Trump was elected. American intelligence agencies concluded that President Vladimir Putin personally ordered the campaign to interfere in the election (Yourish et al., 2018). Dozens of people had been charged by Robert Mueller, the special counsel investigating possible links between the Trump campaign and Russian officials. Trump denied the validity of the investigation, posting hundreds of tweets. The special counsel charged 13 Russians and three companies with carrying out a massive fraud against the American government and conspiring to obstruct enforcement of federal laws (Yourish et al., 2018).

Following that, the U.S. news media revealed the information about the Russian influence campaign on social media in the 2016 election. According to a report produced for the Senate Intelligence Committee, Russia used an array of tactics to try to sway American opinion and divide the country (DiResta et al., 2018). It highlighted the Internet Research Agency that created social media accounts under fake names on every available social media platform (DiResta et al., 2018). A major goal was to support Trump: first against his Republican rivals in

the presidential race, then in the general election, and as president since his inauguration (Shane & Frenkel, 2018).

As of March 2019, even though there have been more details and opinions about Trump's ties to Russia and the hacking issue, the situation is still far away from being fully resolved.

The differences in news media coverage play a role in the audience's perception of political news. Thus, this study attempted to answer the following questions: Why do people believe some news sources and not others? What defines news trust? Despite strong interest in the news media influence on people's mind, the problem of why people trust or do not trust a particular source is still among the most important topics. Understanding how people perceive news articles can help to teach people critical thinking about information they get from news media and deal with misinformation.

This study investigated to what extent American citizens believed news media covering an international issue depending on the source. The object of the study was the Russian-American conflict—the hacking issue that took place during the 2016 presidential campaign in the U.S. Therefore, this study was an attempt to understand to what extent the audience trusted the news media's coverage of an international conflict involving Russia depending on the news source, particularly whether the story was from U.S. or Russian outlets.

Literature review

In democratic systems, news media are actively involved in the interpretation of political reality and therefore in the framing of political alternatives. Street (2011) noticed that news media coverage was presenting a version of the world where news media first had to persuade their audience of its veracity through the use of various techniques. Second, the character and role of news had to be seen as circumscribed by wider commercial and political processes. These

general points, in Street's (2011) opinion, are considerable significance for the way people think about how news represents politics. The logic here is that news programming can be understood as another media product, like soap operas, chat shows, drama series, and lifestyle magazines. All of these products have a particular history and are the result of a particular concatenation of interests.

Most of the time news media coverage of politics resembles a plot full of twists and turns so people sometimes can be tricked into what to believe. For example, Zoonen (2005) stated that politics needs drama, and therefore storylines and personalities are not the issue: "The issue is the forms into which they are molded by historical cultural environment" (p. 7). Street (2011) added to this—"the way the story is told determines the way the political process is imaged" (p. 62). Moreover, some political events can be perceived as an established genre in media. For instance, "elections are covered as if they are sporting encounters" (Street, 2011, p. 63).

News media coverage of the political process differs among countries because of other societal norms and journalist practices or routines. However, according to Street (2011), it is always about the same central process: creating a story. Of course, this story is not a "mirror" of a real political situation but an assemblage of news media and political influence. In other words, "covering politics means creating a believable story about actors and agencies deemed to be important" (Street, 2011, p. 75).

Research on perceptions of news media includes analyzing diverse concepts. Current research is going to open the discussion with agenda-setting theory review because this theory attempts to explain the way people perceive news media and how they influence our minds. Then, the concept of media trust and media bias perception will be examined. More specifically, the study will attempt to investigate the concept of trust and its correlation with

misinformation—the phenomenon that has been actively discussed among researchers, media, and global community. Finally, the phenomenon of news content expectancy will be reviewed in terms of its influence on media trust.

Agenda-setting theory

Historic overview.

Agenda-setting theory explains how much attention a particular topic gets from the public based on the amount of attention that a topic gets by the news media. If the topic is on top of current agenda, it may influence public opinion and the public's broader understanding of social problems (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988). In this process, the concept of gatekeeping is important to mention. All news media have a gatekeeping mechanism because from all variety of events going on around the world they choose what information to pass and what to reject. Moreover, not all the events that made it be included in news media agenda are presented equally. Newspapers, for example, can reveal their assessment of an issue through the length of the headline and the place within the newspaper. Agenda-setting theory assumes that the audience "learns their topic saliences from these judgments of the news media, incorporating a similar set of weights into their personal agendas" (Weaver, McCombs, & Spellman, 1975, p. 460).

A long time before that, Lippmann (1922) discussed how news media construct the reality for people and influence their perception of the world in his book *Public Opinion*. He explained how the news media can create “the pictures inside our heads” (p. 29) that determine our cognitive maps of the world. In his words, public opinion responds not to the real environment but to the “second-hand” environment (p. 205) formed by the news media. In his words, “the only feeling that anyone can have about an event he does not experience is the feeling aroused by his mental image of that event” (p. 13). People, therefore, rely on the media to

explore and to construct their “reality.”

Weaver et al. (1975) discussed the role of media during the Watergate crisis, stating that people not only learn about issues, they also learn "how much importance to attach to an issue from the emphasis placed on it by the mass media" (p. 459).

Current state of agenda-setting theory.

Many scholars have examined the way people perceive the pseudo-environments constructed by news media. For instance, McCombs (2014) considered news media a “second-hand reality” for people. This reality is structured by news, reports, and journalists. Through their day-to-day selection of news, editors and news directors focus people’s attention on small set of news stories and thus influence people’s perceptions of what the most important issues of the day are. Over time, issues covered by news media become the most important among the public. By placing the topic on the public agenda so it becomes the focus of public attention and, possibly, action, the news media construct the public opinion (McCombs, 2014).

At all times, scholars tried to accurately capture public opinion. The most frequently used survey item to measure the public’s agenda is the so-called “most important problem” (or MIP) poll question developed by George Gallup in the 1930s in the United States (What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?) (Yeager, Larson, Krosnick, & Thompson, 2011). The MIP question has become the focus of research on public opinion as well as news media agenda-setting theory. The analysis of the MIP question done by Yeager et al. study (2011) showed that at that time the economy was placed at top priority as a result of news media agenda-setting. However, the latest poll showed the change in people’s perception of the most important problem. For example, currently, U.S. citizens named the most important problem dissatisfaction with government (Gallup, 2018).

Following the findings of earlier study of agenda-setting, scholars came to the conclusion that the media are influential in telling us not only what to think about (first-level agenda), but also how to think about issues (second-level agenda-setting, or framing). Elaborating on the second-level agenda-setting, McCombs and Estrada (1997) offered that Bernard Cohen's (1963) famous statement of the media influence should be reformulated to state that "the media may not only tell us what to think about, they may also tell us how and what to think about it, and even what to do about it" (p. 247).

Moreover, previous research found that the public's attention to an issue directly depends on the number of news media pieces covered this issue (McCombs, 2014; Semetko, Brzinski, Weaver, & Willnat, 1992; Wanta, 1997; McNelly & Izcaray, 1986). More specifically, Wanta (1997) stated:

Agenda-setting, then, is a type of social learning. Individuals learn about the relative importance of issues in society through the amount of coverage the issues receive in news media. Thus, the more coverage an issue receives, the more concern individuals have with the issue. In other words, individuals learn how concerned they should be through the amount of coverage the issue receives (p. 2).

International angle of agenda-setting theory.

People often don't have direct experience with news events in foreign countries. Therefore, the only source of information about world events is the news media. However, according to Wanta, Golan and Lee (2004), news media focus their coverage of international news events on a limited number of nations and regions. This lack of balance in coverage is likely to influence Americans' view of the saliency of international events. More recent research (Mitchell, Simmons, Matsa, & Silver, 2018) supported that idea stating that news consumers are

most interested in news that's close to home. More specifically, in the U.S., 57% follow news about their country very closely whereas only 17% expressed the same idea about international news.

When researchers looked at agenda-setting from the international angle, they concluded that stories of international conflicts have the stronger influence on public opinion; thus, people pay more attention to the coverage (Wanta & Hu, 1993; Wanta et al., 2004; Besova & Cooley, 2009). Basically, these conflict stories dramatize their own fears of safety and danger (Wanta & Hu, 1993).

According to McCombs (2014), agenda-setting effects depend on people's familiarity with an issue. Issues people deal with on a daily basis are obtrusive issues, and issues that people cannot experience are considered unobtrusive issues. International conflicts are considered to be unobtrusive issues, which is why according to agenda-setting theory, it will have greater effects on public opinion (Besova & Cooley, 2009).

Wanta and Hu (1993) defined four categories of news coverage that demonstrated the strongest agenda-setting influence for American citizens: international conflicts involving the United States; terrorism involving the U.S.; crime/drugs; and military/nuclear arms. Among them, the stories with high degrees of conflict and stories with concrete presentations (by including Americans in the stories) had the strongest agenda-setting impact. For example, the news coverage of international conflicts involving the United States has led to the increasing public concern (also in Besova & Cooley, 2009; Semetko et al., 1992). In the current research, when the news media talked about the hacking it meant that every individual could become a victim of the invasion in their personal life. Thus, the personal relevance made it to be more important for people.

News media trust and media bias perception

The concept of news media credibility is related to the general concept of trust in news media. Trying to identify trust, Coleman (1990) explained it as the relationship between trustor and trustee. In this relationship, the trustor places trust and they are “better off” when the trustee is trustworthy (Coleman, 1990, p. 98).

According to Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000), trust depends on “what one expects of another on the basis of norms of behavior or role expectations. In addition, most relationships of trust do not take place in a vacuum; they are embedded in social contexts that impose constraints, values, and sanctions that affect the trust relationship” (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000, p. 570).

When it comes to trust in media, it is hard to understand “why” since the interaction process between the media and its audience is comprehensive. Cappella (2002) stated that in past decades people’s trust in media “changed from low to a very low “low” (p. 231). The author also observed the general trend that social trust, institutional trust, and civic engagement have been in decline. What is more interesting, Cappella (2002) claimed news media to be partly responsible for the declining trust in social capital saying that it is in the core values of media to be biased:

The media don’t lie in any technical sense. They simply do what politicians regularly do. They reel a version of the truth that is slanted, spun in particular ways. What particular ways? Toward replication. If the media can indeed see their stories replicated on the minds and words of their readers and consumers and by the imitation of their competitors, they have been successful transmitters of culture (p. 240).

In the era of misinformation, it only gets easier for news media to “play” with the audience’s opinion, because people now are struggling to distinguish false information from the facts, especially in the context of the current political environment. For example, a recent

assessment of American students' media literacy demonstrated that majority of them (more than 80%) struggled to distinguish a news story from news-like "sponsored content" and recognize possible biases of politically charged tweets (Wineburg, McGrew, Breakstone, & Ortega, 2016). According to Lewandowsky et al. (2012), individuals were more likely to believe information if it followed a logical narrative, came from a source they trust, it was consistent with their preexisting knowledge, and seemed to be something other people believed.

At the same time, Gottfried, Stocking and Grieco (2018) stated that trust in news media in the U.S. fell down drastically. In 2018, only 21% of respondents stated that they had a lot of trust in national news organizations. In contrast, the data from 2011 (Pew Research Center) showed the trend when the news organizations were criticized but actually trusted more than government (69% compared to 51%, respectively).

Vallone, Ross, and Lepper (1985) initially found that content designed to be as neutral as possible was perceived as biased in different directions by partisans on one side or the other depending on their political ideology. Basically, they provided evidence that people may agree that the coverage was biased but completely disagree about the direction of such bias. Moreover, they found that when people perceived political information in news media "the more radical mechanism" kicked in (Vallone et al., 1985, p. 578). More specifically, "the two partisan groups may perceive, or remember, very different stimuli; each partisan group may report that the media spent the most time and gave the most emphasis to the other side" (Vallone et al., 1985, p. 579). However, both sides felt that they were treated unfairly.

Eveland and Shah (2003) later supported Vallone et al. (1985) original findings stating that people who have "high levels of ideologically like-minded discussion tend to hold stronger media bias perceptions than do individuals who have low levels of ideologically like-minded

discussions” (p. 113). Thus, the more people are involved in the political life, the stronger their perceptions about news media bias will be. More specifically, people may agree that the coverage is biased but completely disagree about the direction of such bias.

The recent research by Knight Foundation and Gallup (2018) supported this idea, stating, “partisans rate news stories as more or less trustworthy depending on whether the source is viewed as sympathetic or hostile to their political preferences” (p. 6). In this study, they compared how people perceive articles depending on if they knew the source or not. Their investigation showed significant connection between the outlet and trustworthiness of news. Democrats rated liberal sources to be more trustworthy and conservative sources as less trustworthy when they could see the source of information during the research. In contrast, Republicans considered conservative outlets more trustworthy and liberal news media less trustworthy. Essentially, people with more extreme political views tend to have more perceived bias of news. More specifically, those who defined themselves as very liberal or very conservative marked 43% of articles to be biased, whereas those who defined themselves as moderate found just 31% of articles to be biased. However, the “blinded” group that was not exposed to a news source logo was more trusting of the news content. Therefore, “the brand reputation of these sources affects perceived trustworthiness of the content more than the information presented” (p. 8).

On social media, Democrats and Republicans were both 15% more likely to believe headlines that aligned with their preexisting political beliefs, according to Allcott and Gentzkow (2017). Moreover, this inference gets substantially stronger for people with “ideologically segregated social media networks” (p. 213).

These statements are supported by a current research by Pew Research Center, where

they analyzed how people with different political affiliations perceived factual or opinion news articles and if they could detect the difference between them (Mitchell, Gottfried, Barthel, & Sumida, 2018). The results showed that both Republicans and Democrats were more likely to think news articles are factual when they appealed to their side—even if they were opinions.

Hypotheses development

This study investigated to what extent the audience believed news media covering an international conflict involving Russia, particularly whether the news was attributed to U.S. or Russian outlets depending on the news source. It analyzed how news source trust factors into the audience's perception of political news. This provided a better understanding of what makes people believe some news sources and not believe others.

According to Dimitrova, Kaid, Williams, and Trammell (2005), the tie between news media and the government has influenced the specifics of news media coverage, and that's why there is no "universal expectation that news media in different countries will cover a major news event in the same way" (p. 24).

According to Lecheler (2010), continuing focus of news media discourse on a specific political issue may cause citizens to "recognize connections between an issue and their personal self-interest, identification with a country, or their basic values" (p. 51). When concentrating on the special circumstances of the hacking issue that involved two countries in a conflict, it was expected that the news media coverage of that issue would be perceived differently by different groups of people. Thus, the level of believability—in particular news stories—could depend, for example, on their political views or general attitude toward Russia. More specifically, it was expected that when people were exposed to a news story from a source whose country of origin was specified, it would influence their believability of this content. Consequently, when people

did not know to which country a particular news story was attributed to, they would consider it more neutral and thus, more believable. The current study manipulated two news sources—*RT* and *Russia Today*—in order to test the following hypotheses:

H1a: U.S. news consumers consider a news story more believable when it is attributed to a Russian news source whose country of origin is not specified in its name compared to a Russian news source where ‘Russia’ is visible to the reader/viewer.

Additionally, similar relations were expected in terms of news source trust. When the audience was not familiar with the source it would be more trustworthy compared to a source attributed to Russia. Thus, the following hypothesis can be formulated:

H1b: U.S. news consumers consider a Russian news source whose country of origin is not specified in its name more trustworthy compared to a Russian news source where “Russia” is visible to the reader/viewer.

At the same time, even though news media sources are generally expected to give the same information about current issues, the level of believability would be influenced by people’s existing prejudice and personal beliefs. Therefore, it was anticipated that the attitude toward political news content would be different whether the story was attributed to the U.S. or Russian news sources.

H2a: U.S. news consumers consider a political news story more believable when it is attributed to U.S. news sources compared to Russian news sources.

Moreover, it was implied that stories not related to politics should be covered similarly in different news media. The reason for that is that the neutral story about something that happened, for example, a natural phenomenon, should not activate personal bias or conflict of interest. In other words, there is nothing to argue about, and thus, it was proposed that non-political news

stories would have the same level of believability regardless of the messenger.

H2b: U.S. news consumers consider a non-political news story equally believable when it is attributed to U.S. and Russian news sources.

Research on expectancies has found that people expect sources to take positions in their own self-interest, and when this does not occur (i.e., when a source disconfirms the expected position), it results in greater attributions of source trustworthiness and message validity (Petty, Fleming, Priester, & Feinstein, 2001).

Kelley's attribution theory (1973) proposed that a person's explanation about "why" communicators advocate particular positions affect the persuasive power of the message. He referred to attribution theory as a theory about how people make causal explanations: about how they answer questions beginning with "why?" In addition, Kelley noticed that when something violates a receiver's previously held position it pushes one to reassess the situation and understand why a communicator changed the view.

Eagly, Wood, and Chaiken (1978) argued that a receiver might have a preexisting expectation about what another communicator was planning to address. This expectation was based on the previous experiences with the communicator or the background information about the source. Their experiment showed that regardless of bias recipients expected from the communicator, they were more persuaded when their expectancies were violated. Additionally, recipients rated the communicator as more unbiased when he/she didn't take the expected position. In contrast, the message was considered more biased and insincere when it was expected by recipients.

Following that, Petty et al. (2001) stated that when the source disconfirms expectancies by arguing against self-interest, recipients were likely to trust the message because they inferred

the source might overcome all the potentially biasing factors. For example, a politician would be expected to take a pro-environmental stance in a speech to a group of environmentalists because it is in the politician's self-interest to do so (i.e., obtaining the votes of the group). If the politician does not do this, he or she is assumed to be speaking the truth.

Similar results were supported by Blom (2018) when it was indicated that news believability was predicted by a combination of news source trust and news message expectancy. The study investigated to what extent US citizens believed false information and did not believe factual information about the current state of illegal immigration. The data demonstrated that distrusted news sources could be more believable when people had not anticipated that particular content. When interacting with news media sources, people form their expectations for a particular outlet. Traditionally, the more expected the message from a news source, the higher the believability. However, deviations from these expectations lead to expectancy violations. As a result, when a person does not anticipate particular content from a distrusted news source, the level of believability of that message is increasing. In an expectancy-violation situation, distrusted sources can sometimes demonstrate the higher level of believability compared to trusted news sources (see also: Petty et al., 2001).

Current study attempted to investigate whether the interaction between news source trust and news content expectancy influences the level of believability in news. Therefore, the following hypothesis can be formulated:

H3: Highly expected news content from trusted news sources is more believable than highly expected news content from distrusted sources.

More specifically, when comparing trusted and distrusted sources news believability, it was expected that highly expected news content from trusted sources was more believable than

highly expected content from distrusted sources. At the same time, highly unexpected news content from untrusted sources could be even more believable than highly expected content from trusted sources (Blom, 2013).

Method

News sources

This study analyzed how people perceived information on the same international topic from different news outlets. The focus on the American audience was chosen because they represent the effected side of the conflict as well as the government issues are at the top of MIP (Most Important Problem; Gallup, 2018); thus, the news media coverage of the hacking issue should be more relevant to them.

This study focused on American and Russian news media, and thus, three outlets were chosen in order to represent diversity in opinions. For American news outlets, two sources were chosen: One source that is considered to lean more toward liberal views (*CNN*) and one toward conservative (*Fox News*). Iyengar and Hahn (2009) stated that news-media source preference depends on a person's political affiliation. More specifically, conservatives and Republicans prefer to read news attributed to *Fox News*. At the same time, even though Democrats and liberals prefer to get news from a variety of resources, *CNN* is found among the most popular news sources (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009).

For the Russian news outlet, *RT (Russia Today)* was chosen because it is the most well-known resource representing the Russian government position on the world news media arena. The channel is available for most cable and satellite providers and is present on the Internet, including social media resources.

In addition to American and Russian news sources, *BBC* was added to the questionnaire items measuring source trust. The following was done so the initial focus of the study was not become obvious for participants. Being asked only about Russian and American news sources could have led to some sort of priming effect that would influence the answers to the trust scale.

Sample

The experiment included 198 undergraduate students aged 18–26 years old from a midsize Midwestern university ($M = 20.8$, $SD = 1.4$). About two-thirds of the participants identified as female. A little over one-third identified as male and one person preferred not to identify. Half of the sample identified more with the liberal political ideology, whereas a quarter of the sample identified more with the conservative political ideology. Another quarter of the sample did not lean toward one of the two ideologies. Similar splits were reported for the political party item.

Participants were randomly assigned to each of the cells in a 2 (news content type: political/non-political story) \times 4 (news source: *RT*, *Russia Today*, *CNN*, *Fox News*) factorial design (see Table 1). They then were randomly divided into 8 groups for each condition. Students received extra credit in exchange for their participation.

Experimental stimuli

There were two types of experimental stimuli in this experiment: story (2 \times) and news sources (4). This resulted in a total of 8 experimental conditions (see Table 1). The experiment contains of two news stories conditions—a political and non-political.

Table 1

Experimental design

<i>Political story</i>	RT	Russia Today	CNN	Fox News
<i>Non-political story</i>	RT	Russia Today	CNN	Fox News

For a political story condition, the story about 12 Russian intelligence officers who were indicted for hacking the Democratic party was chosen. To show control conditions, a neutral story—not related to politics—was chosen. However, the story covered a meteor’s explosion in a Russian region, Ural, in 2013, and thus could be attributed to international news.

RT is a Russian international news network funded by the Russian government. Formed in 2005, *Russia Today* was rebranded as *RT* at 2009. Since there is no direct mention of Russian affiliation in a current version of the news source name, *RT* and *Russia Today* were presented as separate news outlets in order to see how people’s perception depends on whether they know that they are exposed to a Russian news source or they do not.

The participants were exposed to one news story: either political or non-political (see Appendix A). These stories were attributed to either *RT*, *Russia Today*, *CNN*, or *Fox News*. The logos of each news outlet were presented with the story to emphasize the news source manipulation.

Procedure

The participants were randomly assigned to one of the eight experimental conditions. They were first asked to evaluate their trust to news sources listed in the questionnaire. Then, the participants were asked to read a news story and answer the questionnaire about it. The content for the experiment consisted of two news stories adapted by length from the original sources (see Appendix A). The content was manipulated with different logos used for news sources

attribution. Each story was designed based of using Chrome web browser on an Apple computer device. A standardized news web story design was chosen in order to minimize distractions and focus participants' attention on the content of the story.

Since the study involved measuring attitudes toward Russia, the data was gathered by a researcher not associated with this study in order to minimize the researcher's bias.

Questionnaire items

News source trust.

In previous research about news media credibility, scholars came up with different factors defining the concept of trust. Gaziano and McGrath (1986) offered to group 12 items together in a credibility factor in order to evaluate how people perceive the media. Among these components is being trustworthy, fair, unbiased, complete, factual, and accurate. Later research, however, criticized this approach and offered an alternative and more concise option for measuring media credibility. Meyer (1988) offered to measure the extent to which a news media source was perceived as fair, unbiased, telling the whole story, accurate, and trustworthy. Even though this paradigm was proposed at the end of the 1980s, it is actively used in modern media research (Kioussis, 2001; Greer, 2003; Oyedemi, 2007; Choi & Lee, 2007; Roberts, 2010; Blom, 2018). Thus, this study used Meyer's paradigm of measuring trust in media source.

In academic research on media perceptions, there has been an overlap between the concept of media trust and media credibility. According to Blomqvist (1997), scholars often use trust and credibility as synonyms. However, Brandts (2012) identified credibility as one of the components of media trust. Trust has traditionally been explained as an "outcome of an interaction process in which trust relationships develop gradually" (Blomqvist, 1997, p. 280). These relationships, essentially, were built between past experiences and anticipated future. This

study used the larger concept of media trust in order to measure people's attitude toward specific news media sources.

Participants were asked this question before exposed to a particular story (see Appendix B). Meyer's 5-item scale was used as an indicator of news source trust. Participants evaluated the news story via a 5-point scale that included the following considerations: fairness, bias, thoroughness, accuracy, and trustworthiness.

For *CNN*, a confirmatory factor analysis of the items was conducted using varimax rotation with one factor explaining 72% of the variance. All items in this analysis had primary loadings over .7. Four items had a loading of at least .85. Internal consistency for the scales was examined using Cronbach's alpha (.90).

For *Fox News*, a confirmatory factor analysis of the items was conducted using varimax rotation with one factor explaining 72% of the variance. All items in this analysis had primary loadings over .7. Internal consistency for the scales was examined using Cronbach's alpha (.90).

For *RT*, a confirmatory factor analysis of the items was conducted using varimax rotation with one factor explaining 68% of the variance. All items in this analysis had primary loadings over .7. Internal consistency for the scales was examined using Cronbach's alpha (.88).

For *Russia Today*, a confirmatory factor analysis of the items was conducted using varimax rotation with one factor explaining 82% of the variance. All items in this analysis had primary loadings over .88. Four items had a loading of at least .85. Internal consistency for the scales was examined using Cronbach's alpha (.95).

In addition, according to the collected data, it needs to be mentioned that the participants were divided into two groups: one group was asked about their perceptions of *RT* ($N = 102$) and another one about *Russia Today* ($N = 96$). The data showed that half sample in the *RT* condition

($N = 51$) was not familiar with this news source. At the same time, 28% of the Russia Today condition was not familiar with the source ($N = 27$).

News content believability.

After exposure to the story, news trust believability was measured using a scale designed by Flanagin and Metzger (2000) that was developed to judge the credibility of online information. For each of four news media sources, participants were asked to rate the degree that they found information on the medium to be believable, accurate, trustworthy, biased, and complete on a 5-point scale (see Appendix B).

Analyzing the Meyer (1988) and the Flanagin and Metzger (2000) scales, Roberts (2010) noticed that these instruments were quite similar. He first utilized both scales working together (Roberts, 2010). More specifically, the Meyer (1988) scale was used to evaluate the level of trust to the messenger (the source) whereas the Flanagin and Metzger (2000) scale measured the level of believability to a particular message (Roberts, 2010).

A confirmatory factor analysis of the items was conducted using varimax rotation with one factor explaining 61% of the variance. All but one item in this analysis had primary loadings over .75. The one item with a lower loading was retained, because the scale has been validated by previous research (Roberts, 2010; Blom, 2018). Internal consistency for the scale was examined using Cronbach's alpha (.86). Participants responded on a 5-point scale, where a lower score indicated higher believability.

News message expectancy

After indicating the news believability level, the participants were asked to respond to the news content expectancy item (Blom, 2018): “*CNN (Fox News, RT, Russia Today)* claims that this story is factually true. What do you think about that statement?” Participants were able to

answer on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 5 = “strongly agree” (see Appendix B).

A confirmatory factor analysis of the items was conducted using varimax rotation with one factor explaining 70% of the variance. All items in this analysis had primary loadings over .7. Internal consistency for the scales was examined using Cronbach’s alpha (.86).

Russia attitude scale.

In order to estimate attitude toward Russia index, the study adapted the Salter and Teger (1975) scale for measuring attitude. Participants were asked to rate their feelings about (1) the country in general, (2) its culture, (3) its internal governmental systems, (4) the country as a tourist destination. Participants were able to respond in a 5-point Likert scale with 1 = “very negative” and 5 = “very positive.” The four items were averaged to become one variable identifying attitude toward Russia (see Appendix B).

A confirmatory factor analysis of the items was conducted using varimax rotation with one factor explaining 50% of the variance. One item has a loading of .79, however the loadings for the other three items were below .7. Internal consistency for the scales was examined using Cronbach’s alpha (.66). As a result, the validity and reliability of the scale did not perform as well as expected. Because of the low sample size in the study it was already challenging to add more independent variables in the regression analyses. Therefore, the Russia scale was not used for the statistical analyses (see Appendix C). An informal check indicated that the scale did not influence the results.

Interaction

The interaction between news source trust and news content expectancy was measured by multiplying the centered scores for each individual. The individual scores were subsequently

centered by subtracting those scores from the sample mean for each variable.

Statistical analysis

Missing data points were replaced with values gathered after five multiple imputation rounds with IBM's SPSS Statistics 25 program. There was no missing data for eight variables out of 42. For 22 variables 2% or less data were missing or participants answered "don't know" for news source trust items where that was an option. Two more variables demonstrated 3% of missing data. Only for items on *RT* (25.4%), *Russia Today* (13.6%), and *BBC* (8.3%) the amount of missing data was extraordinary high, but only because many of them indicated "don't know." Even though those data were not missing in the literal sense, because most participants answered "don't know" for all items of a particular scale it was not possible to impute missing data points. Therefore, those participants were automatically excluded from statistical analyses including those scales.

The multi-item scales were checked for outliers. It was determined that there were no data points three standard deviations from the mean. Therefore, no participants were excluded.

A series of *t*-tests was conducted to address H1a and H1b. ANOVA was conducted to measure H2a and H2b. The results determined whether there was a significant difference between the believability and trust levels for different news media sources. In addition, the interaction between news source trust and news source expectancy (H3) was tested with ordinary least square (OLS) regression.

Results

The primary goal of the study was to analyze the concept of news believability in terms of news source trust and news content expectancy.

The study suggested that U.S. news consumers would consider a news story more believable when it was attributed to a Russian news source whose country of origin was not specified in its name. On the contrary, a news story from a Russian news source where ‘Russia’ is visible to the reader/viewer was expected to be less believable (H1a). Therefore, the difference in perceptions of *RT* and *Russia Today* was analyzed.

An independent-samples *t* test indicated that a news story attributed to *RT* ($M = 2.9$, $SD = 0.7$) was less believable than a news story attributed to *Russia Today* ($M = 3.1$, $SD = 0.8$). The mean difference was relatively small, which resulted in a statistically non-significant finding, $t(95) = 1.54$, $p = .13$. As a result, there was no evidence in support of H1a. The results were similar when political and non-political stories were analyzed individually.

At the same time, a similar hypothesis about the trustworthiness of a Russian news source whose country of origin was not specified in its name compared to a Russian news source where ‘Russia’ was visible to the reader/viewer was supported by the statistical results.

An independent-samples *t* test indicated that the trustworthiness of *RT* ($M = 3.1$, $SD = 0.4$) was higher than the trustworthiness of *Russia Today* ($M = 2.2$, $SD = 0.9$). The mean difference is quite considerable, which resulted in a statistically significant finding, $t(117) = 6.41$, $p < .001$. These results provided evidence in support of H1b.

Table 2

News content believability means

ANOVA

News Source	Political news story	Non-political story
CNN	3.2 (0.5)	3.2 (0.7)
Fox News	3.0 (0.6)	3.0 (0.8)

RT	2.8 (0.7)	2.9 (0.8)
Russia Today	3.0 (0.7)	3.2 (1.0)

Participants responded on a 5-point scale, where a lower score indicated higher believability. Means for news content believability for all eight conditions. Standard deviations in parentheses.

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to seek out differences in believability of a political news story from U.S. and Russian news sources: *CNN* ($M = 3.2$, $SD = 0.5$), *Fox News* ($M = 3.0$, $SD = 0.6$), *Russia Today* ($M = 3.0$, $SD = 0.7$), *RT* ($M = 2.8$, $SD = 0.7$). There were no statistically significant differences among the news sources, than $F(3,96) = 1.05$, $p = .13$. Therefore, there were no differences between U.S. and Russian news sources, which resulted in no evidence in support for H2a (see Table 2).

Since the ANOVA analysis did not report statistically significant results, a post hoc test was not technically required. However, the tendency of the statistical data suggested that if the sample size was larger, the results could have been statistically significant. In that case, a post hoc analysis would have been warranted. The attempt of running an LSD post hoc analysis demonstrated a statistically significant difference between *CNN* and *RT* ($p = .020$) for a political news story. The mean difference between *CNN* and *RT* was .4069 (see Appendix D). These results gave some evidence in support of H2a, because *RT* is the main Russian news network in the U.S. and *CNN* is a worthy representative for U.S. news networks. Therefore, there is evidence that people's cognitive biases interfere in the believability of news coverage about important international affairs.

The study hypothesized that a non-political story condition would demonstrate equal believability for U.S. and Russian news sources, because the news story would be considered more neutral and thus perceived less critically (H2b). A one-way ANOVA was conducted to seek out differences in believability of a non-political news story from U.S. and Russian new

sources: *CNN* ($M = 3.2$, $SD = 0.7$), *Fox News* ($M = 3.0$, $SD = 0.8$), *Russia Today* ($M = 3.2$, $SD = 1.0$), *RT* ($M = 2.9$, $SD = 0.8$). There were no statistically significant differences among the news sources, than $F(3,96) = 1.05$, $p = .37$. Therefore, there were no differences between U.S. and Russian news sources, which provided evidence for support in H2b (see Table 2).

Table 3 represents the results of the interaction between news source trust and news content expectancy. It was noticed that the interaction was a statistically significant predictor of variance in news content believability only in one condition (*CNN* political story). The rest of statistical results provided no evidence in support for H3.

Table 3

Regression results of the interaction between news source trust and news content expectancy

Source	Political news story	Non-political news story
CNN	.39 (< .05)	.13 (.62)
Fox News	-.09 (.64)	.42 (.07)
RT	.17 (.41)	-.25 (.20)
Russia Today	.09 (.76)	-.06 (.83)

Dependent variable: Believability

Beta-coefficients for the interaction for all eight conditions. Significance in parentheses.

OLS: ordinary least square.

For the *CNN* condition, the independent variables explained about 44% of the variance in news content believability for the political story: news source trust ($\beta = .59$, $p = .001$), content expectancy ($\beta = .39$, $p < .05$), and the interaction ($\beta = .39$, $p < .05$). The interaction between news source trust and news content expectancy was a statistically significant predictor of news

believability for this condition. For the non-political story, there were no statistically significant independent variables, although the beta-coefficients were between .13 and .26.

For the *Fox News* condition, the independent variables explained about 13% of the variance in news content believability for the political story. There was only a main effect for news source trust ($\beta = .47, p < .05$). For the non-political story, the independent variables explained 19% of the variance in news content believability. However, there was only a statistically significant result for news content expectancy ($\beta = .54, p < .01$). Even though the interaction was not statistically significant ($p = .074$), there was a moderate beta-coefficient of .42.

For the *Russia Today* condition, the independent variables explained about 0% of the variance in news content believability for the political story. There was only a moderate beta-coefficient of .24 for content expectancy. The independent variables explained about 22% of the variance in news content believability for the non-political story. News source trust was the only statistically significant predictor ($\beta = .61, p < .05$).

For the *RT* condition, the independent variables explained about 1% of the variance in news content believability for the political story. There was only a moderate beta-coefficient of .26 for news source trust. For the non-political story, the independent variables explained 39% of the variance in news content believability. Only content expectancy was a statistically significant predictor ($\beta = .54, p < .01$), however there were moderate effect sizes for news source trust ($\beta = .25, p = .217$) and the interaction ($\beta = -.25, p = .201$).

Discussion

The news media influence and people's perceptions of the news media have been the subject of interest for the past few decades. However, little research has analyzed how people

perceive international conflicts. Due to the examining of news media coverage of the same political issue in different outlets—the hacking scandal during the 2016 presidential elections—this study contributed to further research on the connections between media, political communication and people's perception of news. According to McQuail (1994),

The news media are both a product and also a reflection of the history of their own society and have played a part in it. Despite the similarities of mass media institutions across societies, the news media are by origin, practice and convention very much national institution and respond to domestic political and social pressures and to the expectation of their audience. They reflect express and sometimes actively serve the "national interest", as determined other, more powerful actors and institutions (p. 121).

The study investigated to what extent U.S. news consumers believed news articles depending on whether it was attributed to Russian or U.S. news media outlets. Additionally, news source trust and concepts related to participants' demographic information such as political identification and attitude toward Russia were examined in terms of the influence on people's perceptions of the news coverage of an international issue.

The study was based on two types of news stories (political and non-political) attributed to four news media sources, which resulted in eight experimental conditions. The Russian hacking issue during the 2016 presidential elections was chosen as the media background for the content of the study. The survey experiment method was chosen in order to examine the following questionnaire items such as news source trust, news content believability, news content expectancy, and attitude toward Russia. The experiment included a convenience sample with participants between the ages of 18–26 years from a midsize Midwest university. While the

statistical results of this study were mixed, it is worth recognizing that its findings acknowledged several trends in perception of international news sources and news stories.

Considering previous research on agenda-setting which stated that the public's attention to an issue directly depends on the number of news media pieces covering this issue (McCombs, 2014; Semetko, Brzinski, Weaver, & Willnat, 1992; Wanta, 1997; McNelly & Izcaray, 1986), it was expected that the news media consumers' perception of Russia would be influenced by the media coverage. Additionally, the fact that news media not only tell us what to think about, they also tell us how to think about it (McCombs & Estrada, 1997) should have effected not just the change in the audience's perceptions but also resulted in a switch to a more negative attitude toward Russia and Russian media, in particular.

The low levels of Russian attitudes was reflected in the study results. More specifically, 58.6% of the sample reported negative attitude toward Russia, whereas 24.7% were neutral and only 16.7% had somewhat positive attitude toward Russia. Therefore, the study suggested that U.S. news consumers would consider a news story more believable when it was attributed to a Russian news source whose country of origin was not specified in its name (*RT*) compared to the one with "Russia" in its name (*Russia Today*). In contrast to previous research, which pointed out that people were more likely to believe information if it was consistent with their preexisting knowledge (Lewandowsky et al., 2012), that statement was not supported by the current study. The difference between believability levels for *RT* and *Russia Today* stories was not statistically significant.

In the last couple of years, researchers have reported a drastic decline in news media trust in the U.S. (Gottfried, Stocking, & Grieco, 2018). Thus, this study attempted to measure if there was a difference in trust levels for specific news sources. When comparing Russian news

sources, the one without attribution to Russia (*RT*) turned out to be more trustworthy rather than the news source with Russian attribution in its name (*Russia Today*). The results supported the idea that people were less likely to trust the news source that had negative connotation.

This study showed that in most cases participants did not recognize *RT* being a Russian news source. *Russia Today* changed its name to *RT* in 2009. However, the editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan denied that the reason for changing the name was disguising its roots (Von Twickel, 2010). The findings of the study reflected that *RT* turned out to be more trustworthy compared to *Russia Today* among U.S. news consumers. That meant even though officially the name change was not purposed to “hide” the country in its name, the data collected in this study indicated that it definitely increased the trust to this news source among their potential audience.

The previous research argued that political identification could influence people’s perception of political news. For example, it was found that Democrats and Republicans were more likely to believe news that align with their preexisting political beliefs (Allcot & Gentzkow, 2017). In this study, however, it was noticed that political identification variable did not contribute much toward variance in believability in combination with the main variables in this study, namely news source trust, news content expectancy, and the interaction between them.

The study used four items to measure the attitude toward Russia such as perception of the country in general, its culture, and the government. Participants were also asked to evaluate Russia as a tourist destination. The Russia attitude scale, however, did not reach satisfactory reliability levels. The confirmatory factor analysis indicated that the items were related, but not to satisfactory levels. The cronbach’s alpha was not as high as desirable. Therefore, for future research, the scale needs to be further developed and extended by adding more diverse items.

Further, the study investigated how the participants perceived political news stories attributed to U.S. and Russian news media. Based on the assumption that news consumers prefer domestic news (Mitchell et al., 2018), it was expected that news stories attributed to U.S. news sources would be more believable than news stories attributed to Russian news sources. However, the study did not find a significant difference between Russian and domestic news sources in statistical results. Interestingly enough, additional statistical tests showed a significant difference in believability for *CNN* and *RT* political news stories, in particular. These results gave supported the idea that news media consumers in the U.S. had a higher level of believability for domestic news sources rather than international. Therefore, there was evidence that people's cognitive biases interfere in the believability of news coverage about important international affairs.

In academic research, it was found that stories of international conflicts involving the United States had the stronger influence on public opinion (Wanta & Hu, 1993; Wanta et al., 2004; Besova & Cooley, 2009). Therefore, it was expected that a political news story would be perceived differently rather than a non-political one. The study attempted to examine the difference in perception of a news story that was not related to politics. It was expected that the more neutral news story would be perceived more equally because it lacked any conflicts and contradictions with people's existing knowledge and beliefs. Indeed, according to statistical results, a non-political story demonstrated the same level of believability.

When interacting with news media sources, people's expectations influence their believability in a news story. Traditionally, the more expected the message, the higher the believability. However, when a person perceive unexpected content from a distrusted news source, the level of believability to that content might actually increase (Eagly et al., 1978; Petty

et al., 2001; Blom, 2018). Therefore, the study examined the interaction between news source trust and news content expectancy and evaluated its influence on news believability. The results showed that the interaction turned out to be a statistically significant predictor of variability in news believability only for one condition (*CNN*, political story). For that condition, independent variables explained about 44% of the variance in news believability. Therefore, it can be stated that the study only partially supported previous research findings. The fact that the interaction did not show statistically significant results for a non-political news story was expected. The reason for that was that the news story lacked strong partisan angles and conflicting ideas, either Russian vs. non-Russian, or liberal vs. conservative.

Multiple studies discussed the deteriorating nature of misinformation for the society (Kuklinski et al., 2000; Lewandowsky et al., 2012; Botei, 2017). Even though it is not a new concept, the attention to this phenomenon increased dramatically with the 2016 presidential elections being a starting point. Now it only gets easier for news media to “trick” the audience, because people often cannot distinguish false information from the facts (Wineburg et al., 2016). Consequently, the Pew Research Center reported that “fake news” resulted in a great deal of confusion about current issues among U.S. citizens (Mitchell, et al., 2016). Since the current study observed concepts of news believability, news source trust, and news content expectancy, its findings can contribute to a future research on news media perceptions. More specifically, it can help teaching people more critical thinking and developing the instruments for dealing with misinformation and propaganda. Simply by realizing why an individual trusts a specific news source or a news story can play a big role in making important decisions and having an accurate picture of the world.

Overall, the findings showed that only 5% of participants came across the news from *RT*

(*Russia Today*) within a week. Even though *BCC* has been reported as one of the most trusted news sources among the U.S. news consumers (Mitchell et al., 2014), only 42% of participants stated that they looked into news from *BBC*. When comparing the U.S. media, the situation was a little better, because participants reported that they came across news attributed to *CNN* in 77% and news attributed to *Fox News* in 49%.

The mixing results of the study supported the idea that there is a big portion of confusion among the U.S. news consumers when it comes to choosing a trustworthy news source where they can gather the important information about current events. No one would argue that the traditional news media still set up the public agenda and influence people's perceptions of important issues even though the growing use of social media may also contribute to shaping people's mind. Therefore, the ability to identify "fake news" matters for guiding political and electoral decisions. However, the results of this study indicated that people's own cognitive biases play an important role in perceptions of media bias. Enhanced media literacy training is needed for people to better understand their own cognitive biases in this process.

Limitations and future research

The design of the current study had a few limitations that need to be addressed in future research. Mixed results could be explained by a smaller sample size and a convenience sampling type. The sample consisted of undergraduate students of a midsize Midwestern university. With a larger audience and more various demographic groups the results might demonstrate more significant difference. For a future research development, it could be recommended to include randomly selected participants in the sample. Additionally, it would be beneficial to include different age ranges and racial identifications. So that the findings of the study may be extended to the entire U.S. population.

Since this study mostly focused on the influence of the news source on the content believability, researchers should further study how the audience perceives full news articles. More specifically, what parts of the message news consumers pay attention to and what parts they skip. Extending this idea, it could be also tested what is more important—the source (the messenger) or the message (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000). The participants of this study were strictly presented shortened and standardized articles to avoid confounding factors that could take place in full news coverage. For instance, original news stories would likely include more facts as well as links to related news materials to support their position. Obviously, this could influence audience's perceptions that would affect in the level of believability. Since this is an important area for future research, the current study provided a concentrated analysis of the role of the news source in trust on the basis of two particular news stories.

Mitchell et al. (2018) noticed that news consumers are most interested in news that is close to home. Since people are less interested in international news, there is not much research done on international news sources and their comparison with the U.S. sources in academic research. Therefore, future research could address that issue by conducting more studies focusing on international news from multiple countries representing different cultural background.

Future research could also include measures involving cultural background, prejudice, and stereotyping to explain differences in cognitive perceptions among news consumers. In addition to that, internal psychological characteristics involving mood and attention as well as external conditions like crowd noise could be added to the model for future research.

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Appendix A

Experimental stimuli

CNN condition (political story)



The screenshot shows a web browser displaying a CNN article. The URL is <https://www.cnn.com/mueller-indicts-12-russians-for-2016-presidential-election-hacking-offences/>. The article is titled "Mueller indicts 12 Russians for 2016 presidential election hacking offences" and is written by Sam Brown. The text of the article is as follows:

Twelve Russian intelligence officers were indicted for hacking the Democratic party and the Hillary Clinton campaign, the US Department of Justice announced, adding that no Americans were involved and no votes affected.

Named in the indictment are members of alleged GRU Units 26165 and 74455, based in Moscow: Viktor Netyksho, Boris Antonov, Dmitry Badin, Ivan Yermakov, Aleksey Lukashev, Sergey Morgachev, Nikolay Kozachek, Pavel Yershov, Artem Malyshev, Aleksandr Osadchuk, and Aleksey Potemkin.

The suspects are members of the GRU, the Russian military intelligence, and are alleged to have hacked into the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC), the Democratic National Committee (DNC), and the Clinton campaign during the 2016 presidential election.

Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein announced the indictment on Friday in a press conference, accusing the twelve of "conspiring to interfere with the 2016 presidential election."

"There is no allegation in this indictment that any American citizen committed a crime" or that anything affected the vote count or election results, Rosenstein said.

The hackers infiltrated their targets by using spear phishing and malware, and created fictitious online personas 'DCLeaks' and 'Guccifer 2.0' to disseminate the hacked materials.

"Both were created and controlled by the Russian GRU," Rosenstein claimed.

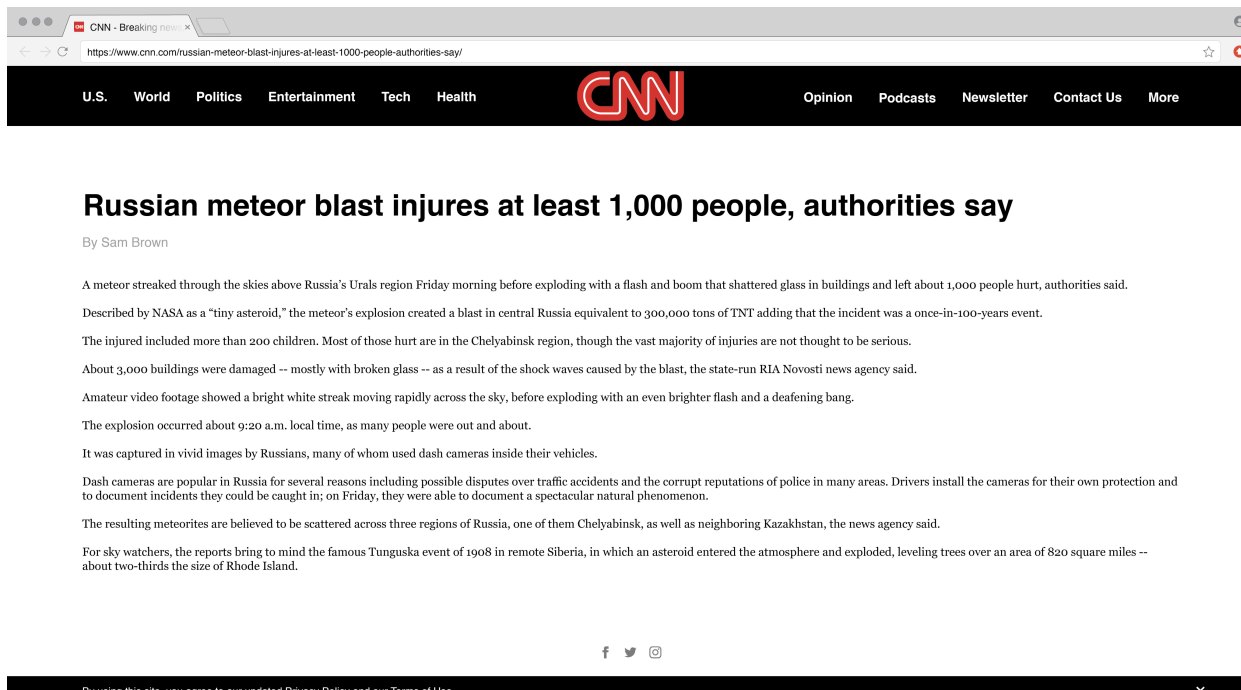
The indictment does not mention WikiLeaks by name, but refers to it as "Organization 1" that "had previously posted documents stolen from US persons, entities and the US government."

It was WikiLeaks that published the emails from the private account of Clinton campaign manager John Podesta, starting in October 2016.

The indictment says, the group hacked into the DCCC network and installed malware that later enabled them to access the DNC computers. They allegedly "compressed" the files and moved them using the software the indictment calls "X-Tunnel" and tried to hide their tracks by deleting access logs.

At the bottom of the article, there are social media sharing icons for Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. A footer bar at the very bottom states: "By using this site, you agree to our updated Privacy Policy and our Terms of Use."

CNN condition (non-political story)



The screenshot shows a web browser displaying a CNN article. The URL is <https://www.cnn.com/russian-meteor-blast-injures-at-least-1000-people-authorities-say/>. The article is titled "Russian meteor blast injures at least 1,000 people, authorities say" and is written by Sam Brown. The text of the article is as follows:

A meteor streaked through the skies above Russia's Urals region Friday morning before exploding with a flash and boom that shattered glass in buildings and left about 1,000 people hurt, authorities said.

Described by NASA as a "tiny asteroid," the meteor's explosion created a blast in central Russia equivalent to 300,000 tons of TNT adding that the incident was a once-in-100-years event.

The injured included more than 200 children. Most of those hurt are in the Chelyabinsk region, though the vast majority of injuries are not thought to be serious.

About 3,000 buildings were damaged -- mostly with broken glass -- as a result of the shock waves caused by the blast, the state-run RIA Novosti news agency said.

Amateur video footage showed a bright white streak moving rapidly across the sky, before exploding with an even brighter flash and a deafening bang.

The explosion occurred about 9:20 a.m. local time, as many people were out and about.

It was captured in vivid images by Russians, many of whom used dash cameras inside their vehicles.

Dash cameras are popular in Russia for several reasons including possible disputes over traffic accidents and the corrupt reputations of police in many areas. Drivers install the cameras for their own protection and to document incidents they could be caught in; on Friday, they were able to document a spectacular natural phenomenon.

The resulting meteorites are believed to be scattered across three regions of Russia, one of them Chelyabinsk, as well as neighboring Kazakhstan, the news agency said.

For sky watchers, the reports bring to mind the famous Tunguska event of 1908 in remote Siberia, in which an asteroid entered the atmosphere and exploded, leveling trees over an area of 820 square miles -- about two-thirds the size of Rhode Island.

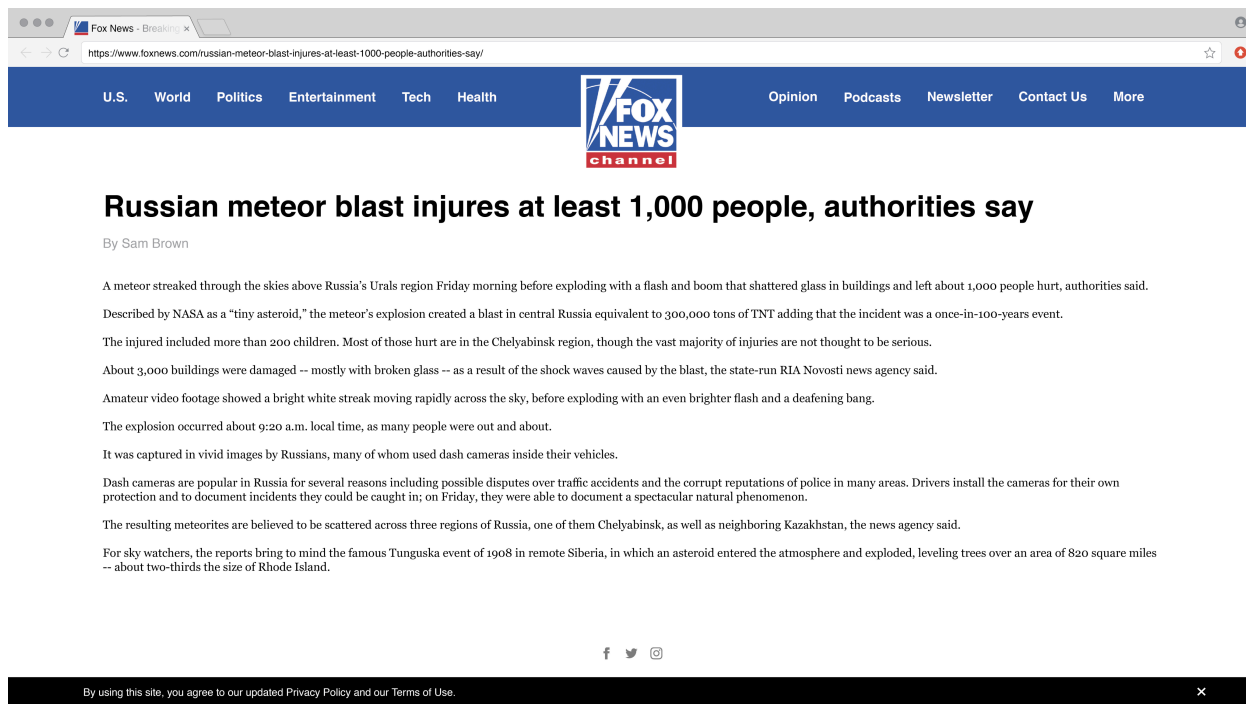
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Fox News condition (political story)



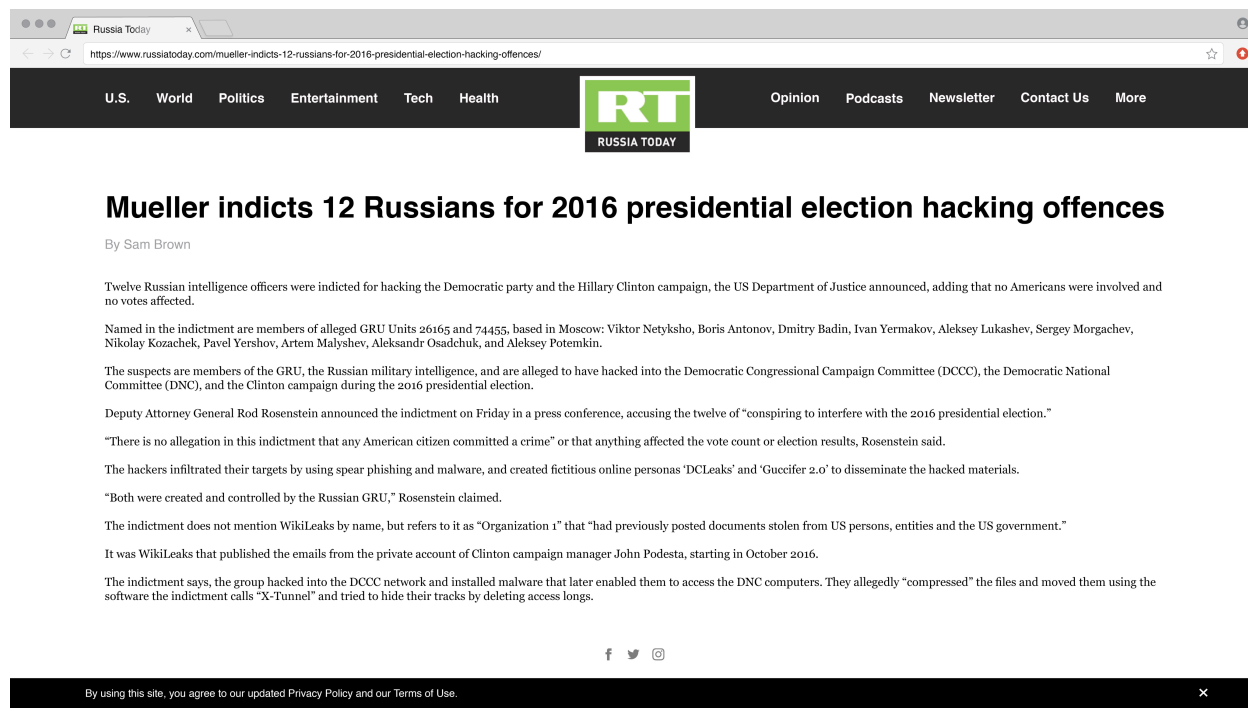
The screenshot shows a web browser displaying a Fox News article. The browser's address bar shows the URL: <https://www.foxnews.com/mueller-indicts-12-russians-for-2016-presidential-election-hacking-offences/>. The Fox News logo is prominently displayed in the center of the page header. Below the header, the article title "Mueller indicts 12 Russians for 2016 presidential election hacking offences" is shown in a large, bold font. The byline "By Sam Brown" is located just below the title. The main body of the article contains several paragraphs of text, including details about the indictment of 12 Russian intelligence officers, the involvement of GRU Units 26165 and 74455, and the alleged hacking of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC), the Democratic National Committee (DNC), and the Clinton campaign during the 2016 presidential election. The article also mentions Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein's announcement of the indictment and the use of malware like 'GuCifer 2.0' to disseminate hacked materials. At the bottom of the article, there are social media sharing icons for Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. A footer at the very bottom of the page states: "By using this site, you agree to our updated Privacy Policy and our Terms of Use."

Fox News condition (non-political story)



The screenshot shows a web browser displaying a Fox News article. The browser's address bar shows the URL: <https://www.foxnews.com/russian-meteor-blast-injures-at-least-1000-people-authorities-say/>. The Fox News logo is prominently displayed in the center of the page header. Below the header, the article title "Russian meteor blast injures at least 1,000 people, authorities say" is shown in a large, bold font. The byline "By Sam Brown" is located just below the title. The main body of the article contains several paragraphs of text, including details about a meteor streaking through the skies above Russia's Urals region, the explosion creating a blast in central Russia equivalent to 300,000 tons of TNT, and the resulting injuries to at least 1,000 people, including more than 200 children. The article also mentions that the explosion occurred about 9:20 a.m. local time and that it was captured in vivid images by Russians. At the bottom of the article, there are social media sharing icons for Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. A footer at the very bottom of the page states: "By using this site, you agree to our updated Privacy Policy and our Terms of Use."

Russia Today condition (political story)



The screenshot shows the Russia Today website with the URL <https://www.russiatoday.com/mueller-indicts-12-russians-for-2016-presidential-election-hacking-offences/>. The page features a navigation bar with links to U.S., World, Politics, Entertainment, Tech, Health, Opinion, Podcasts, Newsletter, Contact Us, and More. The main headline is "Mueller indicts 12 Russians for 2016 presidential election hacking offences" by Sam Brown. The article text is as follows:

Twelve Russian intelligence officers were indicted for hacking the Democratic party and the Hillary Clinton campaign, the US Department of Justice announced, adding that no Americans were involved and no votes affected.

Named in the indictment are members of alleged GRU Units 26165 and 74455, based in Moscow: Viktor Netyksho, Boris Antonov, Dmitry Badin, Ivan Yermakov, Aleksey Lukashev, Sergey Morgachev, Nikolay Kozachek, Pavel Yershov, Artem Malyshev, Aleksandr Osadchuk, and Aleksey Potemkin.

The suspects are members of the GRU, the Russian military intelligence, and are alleged to have hacked into the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC), the Democratic National Committee (DNC), and the Clinton campaign during the 2016 presidential election.

Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein announced the indictment on Friday in a press conference, accusing the twelve of "conspiring to interfere with the 2016 presidential election."

"There is no allegation in this indictment that any American citizen committed a crime" or that anything affected the vote count or election results, Rosenstein said.

The hackers infiltrated their targets by using spear phishing and malware, and created fictitious online personas 'DCLeaks' and 'Guccifer 2.0' to disseminate the hacked materials.

"Both were created and controlled by the Russian GRU," Rosenstein claimed.

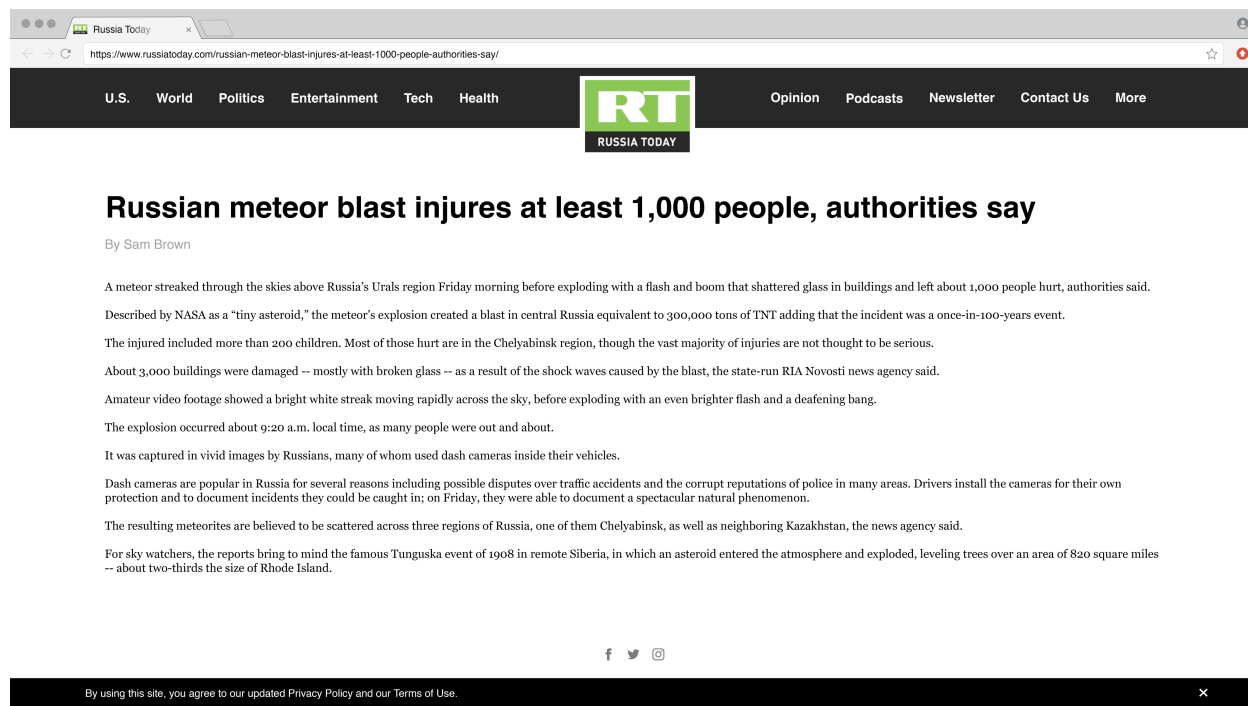
The indictment does not mention WikiLeaks by name, but refers to it as "Organization 1" that "had previously posted documents stolen from US persons, entities and the US government."

It was WikiLeaks that published the emails from the private account of Clinton campaign manager John Podesta, starting in October 2016.

The indictment says, the group hacked into the DCCC network and installed malware that later enabled them to access the DNC computers. They allegedly "compressed" the files and moved them using the software the indictment calls "X-Tunnel" and tried to hide their tracks by deleting access logs.

At the bottom of the article, there are social media sharing icons for Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, and a footer with the text: "By using this site, you agree to our updated Privacy Policy and our Terms of Use."

Russia Today condition (non-political story)



The screenshot shows the Russia Today website with the URL <https://www.russiatoday.com/russian-meteor-blast-injures-at-least-1000-people-authorities-say/>. The page features a navigation bar with links to U.S., World, Politics, Entertainment, Tech, Health, Opinion, Podcasts, Newsletter, Contact Us, and More. The main headline is "Russian meteor blast injures at least 1,000 people, authorities say" by Sam Brown. The article text is as follows:

A meteor streaked through the skies above Russia's Urals region Friday morning before exploding with a flash and boom that shattered glass in buildings and left about 1,000 people hurt, authorities said.

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For sky watchers, the reports bring to mind the famous Tunguska event of 1908 in remote Siberia, in which an asteroid entered the atmosphere and exploded, leveling trees over an area of 820 square miles -- about two-thirds the size of Rhode Island.

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RT condition (political story)



The screenshot shows the RT website with a dark navigation bar. The main headline is "Mueller indicts 12 Russians for 2016 presidential election hacking offences" by Sam Brown. The article text is as follows:

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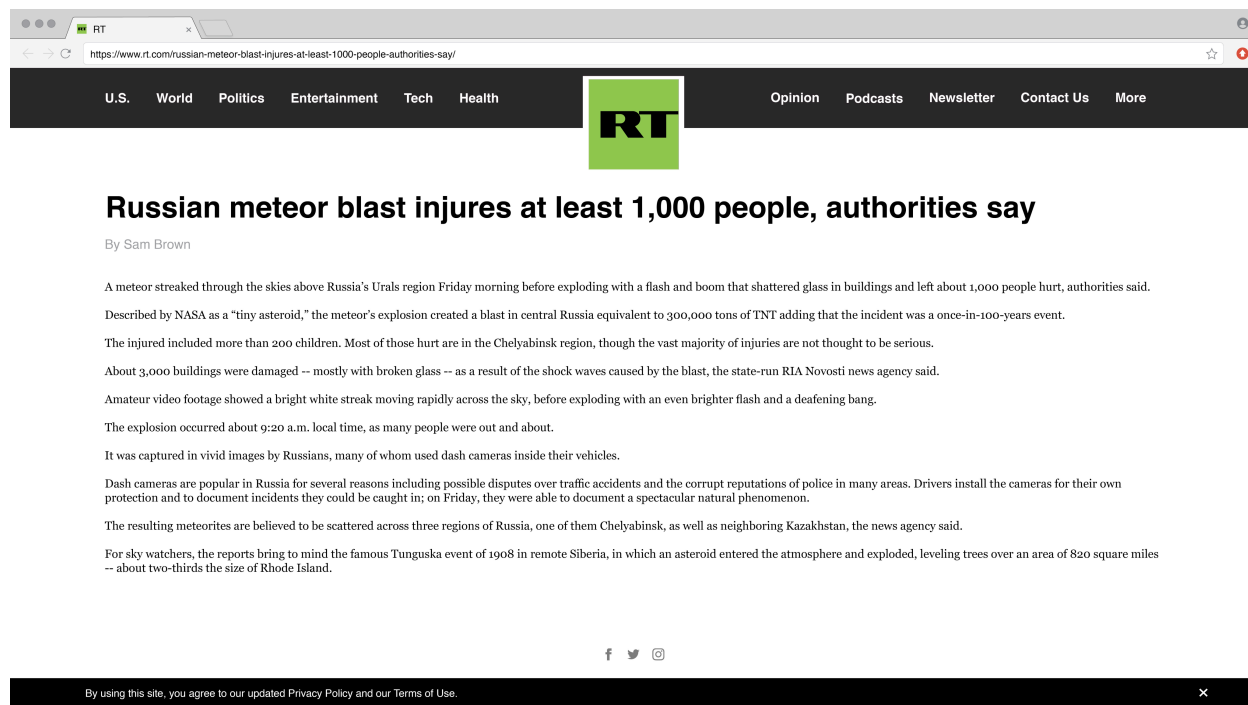
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RT condition (non-political story)



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Appendix B

Questionnaire Items

News source trust

(Strongly disagree/Somewhat disagree/Neither agree or disagree/Somewhat Agree/Strongly Agree)

Please respond to the following statements about news networks:

If you would watch a news story from [CNN, Fox News, RT (Russia Today), BBC], would you expect it to be...

Fair

Unbiased

Telling the whole story

Accurate

Trustworthy

News content believability

(Strongly disagree/Somewhat disagree/Neither agree or disagree/Somewhat Agree/Strongly Agree)

What do you think the odds are that this specific article from the website of [CNN, Fox News, RT (Russia Today)] is...

Factually true

Believable

Accurate

Realistic

Unbiased

Can be trusted

News message expectancy

(Strongly disagree/Somewhat disagree/Neither agree or disagree/Somewhat Agree/Strongly Agree)

[CNN, Fox News, RT (Russia Today)] claims that this article is factually true. What do you think about that statement?

Unsurprising

Expected

Predictable

Anticipated

Political ID questions

(Strong Democrat/Leaning Democrat/Neither Dem/Rep/Leaning Republican/Strong Republican)

What political party do you identify most with?

(Strong Liberal/Liberal/Neither Lib/Con/Conservative/Strong Conservative)

How would you describe your political ideology?

Russia Attitude Scale

(Extremely negative/Slightly Negative/Neutral/Slightly Positive/Extremely positive)

How do you feel about Russia as a country?

How do you feel about Russian culture?

How do you feel about the Russian government?

How do you feel about Russia as a tourist destination?

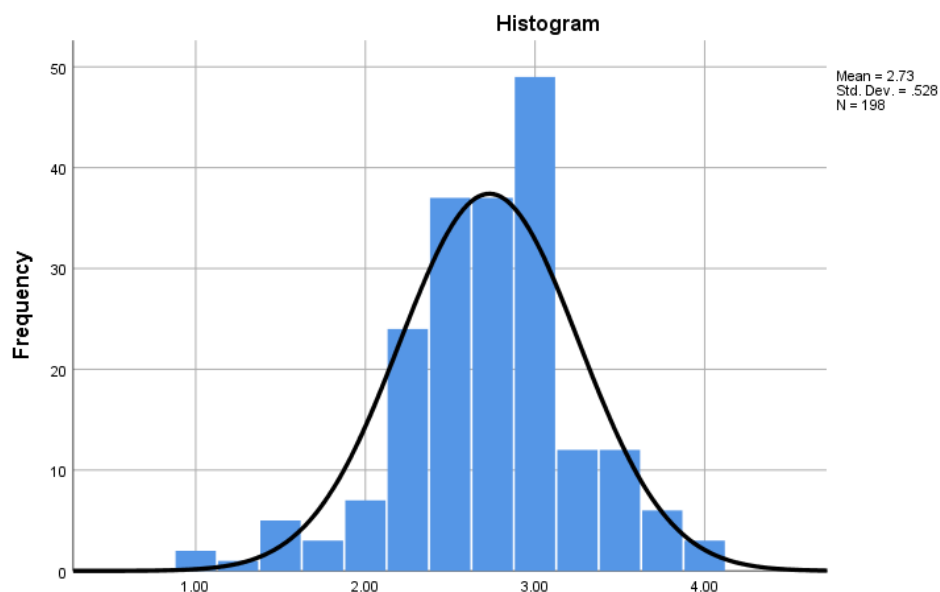
Appendix C

Russia attitude scale and histogram

Table 1. Russia attitude scale results (frequencies). 5-point Likert scale with 1 = “very negative” and 5 = “very positive.”

Figure 1. Attitude toward Russia scale. 5-point Likert scale with 1 = “very negative” and 5 = “very positive.” Mean = 2.173. SD = .528. N = 198.

Russia					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1.00	2	1.0	1.0	1.0
	1.25	1	.5	.5	1.5
	1.50	5	2.5	2.5	4.0
	1.75	3	1.5	1.5	5.6
	2.00	7	3.5	3.5	9.1
	2.25	24	12.1	12.1	21.2
	2.50	37	18.7	18.7	39.9
	2.75	37	18.7	18.7	58.6
	3.00	49	24.7	24.7	83.3
	3.25	12	6.1	6.1	89.4
	3.50	12	6.1	6.1	95.5
	3.75	6	3.0	3.0	98.5
	4.00	3	1.5	1.5	100.0
	Total	198	100.0	100.0	



Appendix D

LSD post hoc analysis table

Table 1. Results for an LSD post hoc analysis

Multiple Comparisons							
Dependent Variable: Believe							
LSD							
News story type	(I) News source	(J) News source	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Non-political	Russia Today	RT	.3218	.22708	.160	-.1289	.7726
		CNN	-.0274	.25104	.913	-.5257	.4709
		Fox News	.1786	.23194	.443	-.2818	.6390
	RT	Russia Today	-.3218	.22708	.160	-.7726	.1289
		CNN	-.3492	.23044	.133	-.8066	.1082
		Fox News	-.1432	.20948	.496	-.5590	.2726
	CNN	Russia Today	.0274	.25104	.913	-.4709	.5257
		RT	.3492	.23044	.133	-.1082	.8066
		Fox News	.2060	.23523	.383	-.2610	.6729
	Fox News	Russia Today	-.1786	.23194	.443	-.6390	.2818
		RT	.1432	.20948	.496	-.2726	.5590
		CNN	-.2060	.23523	.383	-.6729	.2610
Political	Russia Today	RT	.1603	.18586	.391	-.2088	.5293
		CNN	-.2467	.18743	.191	-.6188	.1255
		Fox News	.0298	.18304	.871	-.3337	.3932
	RT	Russia Today	-.1603	.18586	.391	-.5293	.2088
		CNN	-.4069*	.17250	.020	-.7494	-.0644
		Fox News	-.1305	.16772	.438	-.4635	.2025
	CNN	Russia Today	.2467	.18743	.191	-.1255	.6188
		RT	.4069*	.17250	.020	.0644	.7494
		Fox News	.2764	.16945	.106	-.0600	.6129
	Fox News	Russia Today	-.0298	.18304	.871	-.3932	.3337
		RT	.1305	.16772	.438	-.2025	.4635
		CNN	-.2764	.16945	.106	-.6129	.0600

Based on observed means.

The error term is Mean Square(Error) = .379.

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.